

Capacity building and resilience

What participants
learned through
ArtsLabsm

2014

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Cover Photos (top to bottom):

"Powwow Perspectives" at Edge Center for the Arts, photo courtesy of the organization; TU Dance rehearsal, photo by Ackerman + Gruber; Iris Shiraishi performing, photo ©Michal Daniel, courtesy of Mu Performing Arts; Jon Offutt in studio, photo courtesy of The Arts Partnership; Theatre B founding ensemble members, photo courtesy of the organization.

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Welcome

ArtsLab has been strengthening and nurturing artists, cultural leaders, and their organizations for more than a decade. It has fostered resilient organizations that respond to and shape community identity. And it has helped place our region at the center of conversations around creative vitality and collaborative leadership.

This extraordinary report investigates just how that work happened—looking at ways ArtsLab supports its participants and exploring the common practices and decision making approaches that enable growth. The findings offer key insights for multiple fields—including organizations looking to strengthen their adaptability, funders interested in the leadership qualities that support careful fiscal oversight, and our colleagues in other capacity building programs, both within and beyond the arts community.

Our work was guided by a remarkable team, including evaluator M. Christine Dwyer of RMC Research Corporation, and consultant and writer Sarah Lutman of Lutman and Associates, who reviewed the evolution of our program, the progress of our participating organizations, and the activities that resulted in lasting change. Their findings are distilled in the following pages and I thank them for their commitment to this project.

Just as ArtsLab is delivered through a cohort of participating arts organizations, so too is its leadership provided by a collaborative cohort of grantmakers who have worked as a team to help us design and deliver such a unique program. To the generous collective who have invested in our work from the beginning: Bush Foundation, The McKnight Foundation, Mardag Foundation, F. R. Bigelow Foundation, The Saint Paul Foundation—your longstanding collaboration has inspired us all.

To the eight organizations that contributed their time and energy to this research, and to the 39 organizations in the greater ArtsLab community—we are humbled by your accomplishments and dedication to your communities. To the many members of our Curriculum Design Team; ArtsLab staff and Program Director Sharon Rodning Bash; and the innumerable consultants who have supported our work—you should be incredibly proud of your efforts.

Arts Midwest is now looking ahead to determine how ArtsLab can continue to nurture cultural leadership among the organizations that make our region vibrant. We look forward to all that is on the horizon for this vital program and to keeping you informed about our progress.

Sincerely,



David Fraher
President & CEO
Arts Midwest

Capacity building and resilience

What participants learned through ArtsLabsm

Small and mid-sized arts organizations are key contributors to community vitality and identity. What are the best ways to help them thrive? That is the question posed by this study, which uses participant experiences in the ArtsLab program to identify activities and interventions that fostered learning and capacity building in eight important community-based arts organizations in Minnesota and North Dakota.

This is not an evaluation of ArtsLab per se. Rather it's an inquiry into questions of learning and resilience. Every organization has ups and downs. Founders depart, economies fail, grants are won and lost, and roofs leak. How do small organizations learn to adapt and thrive? What capacities do they draw on for their resilience? How have they learned to see and create opportunities for growth and development? And what do the organizations themselves say when they reflect on this?

"Resilience is, 'The capacity of a system, enterprise or person to maintain its core purpose and integrity in the face of dramatically changed circumstances.'"

– from *Resilience*, by Andrew Zolli

This study is based on in-person visits and interviews with board, staff, and artists from eight of the 39 organizations that participated in ArtsLab between 1999 and 2014.

The organizations profiled were selected to include geographic, community, and discipline diversity, as well as diversity in the main opportunities and challenges tackled as part of their ArtsLab projects. Those selected had successfully navigated through at least one major transition or opportunity.

Organizations identified common factors that have led to this success. While money is an obvious factor, it was not the first mentioned by any of the groups involved in this study. Instead, they most often reflected on the qualities of their leadership team, and the ways they learned to work together both internally



Mizna's writing group provides a supportive literary community for emerging Arab American and Muslim writers.

Photo by Ackerman + Gruber

within their organizations and externally with their communities. These conversations offer important lessons for grantmakers.

Capacities in Common

A team of committed leaders

Over and over, organizations described a team approach to their work that helped them build capacity, learn, and change. ArtsLab encourages this group dynamic since the program requires that at least three people from each organization participate in retreats and training activities.

The ArtsLab curriculum provides tools and opportunities for individuals to explore their personal learning and leadership styles, and to understand why diverse styles and perspectives among team members will strengthen decision-making. Over the course of their two years in ArtsLab, teams spend considerable time together, away from their office settings, grappling with their organization's future. Several organizations described this time away together as the single most important benefit of ArtsLab.

While all organizations have titular leaders, the study showed that in practice, organizations can be led from any position within a leadership team (or “guiding coalition” to use the language of Harvard professor John Kotter). In many instances, leadership comes from artists, whether or not they are at the top of the organizational chart or are serving in the role of management, Board, or as practicing artists. We consistently found that artists are powerful drivers of organizational change and development, coming naturally to change management processes based on their training and facility in artistic practice. In other instances, a Board or staff member provided important organizational development insights by bringing skills and experiences from another sector to the arts setting.



In addition to presenting American Indian artwork in its gallery, All My Relations Arts is a resource and gathering place for the entire community.

Photo by Sharon Rodning Bash

The trust and dedication among the leadership team members, not the specific leadership structure itself, was the most important factor observed. Where the leadership group is active, bonded, and mutually supportive, organizations have greater intellectual and experiential resources to draw on, and more moral support and camaraderie when addressing challenging questions, opportunities, and transitions.

Knowing what not to do

Organizations reported that over time they learned to express their values clearly and to hone and formalize their decision-making

processes. They developed a strong sense not only of what to do, but also of what not to do. The ArtsLab curriculum supports this learning by asking organizations to create a “strategy screen” that identifies the questions that should be answered before a decision is reached. While faculty described these activities as introducing



An important asset in the small community of Bigfork, Minnesota, Edge Center for the Arts boasts a 280-seat, state-of-the-art auditorium.

Photo courtesy of Edge Center for the Arts

new ways to refine strategy, organizations used different words to talk about this process. They experienced the activity as values-driven and rooted in conversation about the need to make important organizational choices based on shared values.

Small organizations are often the sought-after partner of larger organizations, especially since small organizations are frequently connected to desirable new audiences that larger organizations would like to reach. Clarity around organizational values, and an agreed-on strategy screen, helped several ArtsLab participants focus on their most important strategic activities, while feeling confident about rejecting other proposals, even those from desirable partners and funders. This clarity also helped organizations know which opportunities are aligned with their values and strategy, and should be vigorously pursued, with good results.

Seeing from the outside in

The ArtsLab curriculum asks organizations to create environmental scans of the people, places, ideas, and trends that influence their work. Then they map the connections. Several organizations reported profound shifts in outlook after considering this outside-in orientation. They were able to make changes in their approach to audiences and constituents and to identify new alliances and resonances. This frequently led to increased income, larger audiences, and other benefits.

Tools made available through ArtsLab include low-tech audience and participant surveys, informal focus groups, and social media engagement. Colleague organizations within the ArtsLab peer learning cohort also provided



With a vision to advance the arts in Fargo-Moorhead, The Arts Partnership supports activities like this poetic public art project.

Photo courtesy of The Arts Partnership

important reference points for participants, fueling sharing and discovery among the groups through conversation and comparison.

Guided by a sense of purpose

Notably, organizations expressed a deep sense of obligation to a lasting purpose beyond their present-day activities, challenges, and plans. Their sense of existing because of and on behalf of community is a distinction that ArtsLab

did not create in the participating organizations; it is one these organizations inherently embody. Almost by definition, community-based arts organizations understand that they are advancing multiple agendas beyond the art itself, whether for economic development, social justice, creative placemaking, or all of these and more.

Participants value the way ArtsLab has validated and recognized the purpose and contributions of community-based arts organizations. As one of the few sustained efforts to support small and mid-sized arts organizations in the region, ArtsLab shines a bright light on the role these organizations play within the ecology and diversity of the arts sector.

Takeaways for Grantmakers

What organizations said about grantmaking practice

Organizational interviews revealed fresh insights for grantmakers. Leaders provided key observations about the grantmaker behaviors that make progress more difficult. This feedback from community-based arts organizations offers

important insights to the grantmaking community, as grassroots innovators are key partners in the work many grantmakers do.

Change takes time

Organizations observed that grantmakers expect nearly instantaneous progress toward measurable objectives, even against blustery headwinds. Community-based organizations are often addressing multiple objectives that include long-standing social equity concerns; results may take decades—not months—to achieve. Rural organizations are particularly challenged: the limited human and financial resources available make them doubly constrained. Grantmakers who partner with community-based organizations should consider a long time horizon.



By setting aside structured time for strategic thinking, Mu Performing Arts was able to navigate a leadership transition while advancing their mission.

Photo by Ackerman + Gruber

Lean in when organizations are struggling

Organizations that were dealing with leadership transitions or other major organizational disruptions reaped specific rewards from ArtsLab's peer learning approach, from its consulting capacity, and from the grants provided. These organizations suggested that without ArtsLab, they might have been penalized by a wait-and-see attitude from funders. Instead they described deep benefits from the lean-in

approach available to them through hands-on help from ArtsLab staff and from their peer organizations.

For grantmakers considering investments in organizations that are struggling with change and disruption, look for evidence of resilience factors: a dedicated leadership team, commitment to the organization's cause, and the ability to see the situation with an outside-in lens.

Promote asset-based philanthropy

Organizations are frustrated with the problem/solution framework of grantmaking organizations that ask, "What problem are you trying to solve?" as their opening inquiry. Instead, these organizations are working to strengthen and build on community assets like artistic expression, storytelling capacity, and local economics—to build not to fix. Individual organizations cannot by themselves prevail against philanthropic trends without help from sympathetic funders. The cultural sector needs more grantmaker voices willing to bring asset-based ideas and results to the forefront of discourse.

Advance an entire enterprise

Project-based grants that strengthen one element of the enterprise without taking a total organizational view are particularly difficult for small organizations. New projects at any scale



The Cedar Cultural Center's programs continually evolve to reflect the changing landscape of its neighborhood.

Photo by Ackerman + Gruber

require investment in new capacity. Without a grant sufficient to cover both the project and the required capacity, organizations can be whiplashed and stretched beyond what is healthy. The continuous pursuit of project grants leaves organizations with weak infrastructure and diverts focus from long-term, sustainable capacity-building efforts.

In Conclusion

To spend time with leaders of small and mid-sized organizations is to be inspired. Their tenacity, ingenuity, relationship to community, and artistic commitment offer lessons not only for grantmakers but also for all arts organizations seeking relevance within today's fragmented cultural landscape. By offering authentic and direct cultural experiences at the grassroots level, small organizations meet people where they live, work, and play—reinforcing community identity, building connections, and creating meaning and value. It is difficult to imagine our communities without their important contributions.



Theatre B artists apply their creative process to building a strong, adaptable enterprise.

Photo courtesy of Theatre B

In their own words

Designed to help arts organizations build their leadership, adaptive, and operational capacities, ArtsLab challenges participants to examine their infrastructure, their values, and their role in community. We asked participants to reflect on what they learned through ArtsLab. Here's what they said:

We affirmed and refined purpose

- Articulated core values
- Aligned priorities and processes with values
- Regularly revisited mission to shape identity
- Developed an external perspective to see our work from the outside in

We strengthened our team and clarified roles

- Learned together about team dynamics
- Built a committed coalition
- Strengthened governance processes
- Committed to candid and continuous internal communication
- Cultivated trusted external advisors and mentors

We adopted new organizational practices

- Learned theory and insights from fields of organizational practice
- Developed methods for organizational reflection, continuous improvement, and adaptation
- Focused on managing all organizational dimensions: programs, people, processes
- Employed approaches for listening deeply to communities and constituents

We developed necessary infrastructure

- Built robust financial planning and operational systems
- Identified the economic drivers and influences in our marketplace
- Generated multi-year plans with financial benchmarks
- Set a foundation for more ambitious fundraising

What organizations appreciated about the ArtsLab approach

- Cohort structure with diverse organizations
- Team-based participation, including staff and board members
- Learning opportunities took place over time and were intensive
- Included activities for individuals, teams, and the whole cohort
- Delivered by faculty as well as through peer learning, support, and exchange
- Flexible structure allowed organizations to hand pick from program as needed
- Variety of consultants available to help find the best match for the organization
- Intensive coaching available from either ArtsLab staff or a mentor/intermediary
- Accompanying grant support available to build strategic capacities
- Tools and curriculum materials had long life as ongoing references
- Continued communication with cohort participants—developed alliances and friendships

All My Relations Arts

Minneapolis, Minnesota

Claim your story. Be a place of meaning. Tell your story loudly and beautifully.

When is a gallery not only a gallery? All My Relations Arts (AMRA) answers that question when describing its role as a neighborhood gathering place, resource, and advocate—efforts that reach far beyond its lauded exhibition programs for contemporary American Indian artists.

Founded in 1999, AMRA was initially housed in a building owned by the Great Neighborhoods! Development Corporation (GNDC). With an established reputation for exhibitions that illuminate the quality and complexity of American Indian contemporary art while aiming to “provoke as well as unite” audiences, AMRA attracted more than 30,000 visitors to the gallery over its first nine years.



A visitor takes in *Where I Fit*, textile art by Maggie Thompson in the All My Relations Gallery

Photo by Ackerman + Gruber

At a time when individual grantmakers might have taken a “wait and see” approach, ArtsLab quickly provided fundraising and financial planning consultants to help AMRA and NACDI identify a new gallery space and raise funds needed for purchase and renovation. By the time AMRA completed the three-year ArtsLab intensive, the gallery was thriving in its new home, which

incorporates a large, bright exhibition space with ample room for community gatherings, a café, and NACDI's administrative offices. Its central location is visible and convenient. The two organizations are now essentially one, with NACDI's broad mission encompassing a range of projects that advance the wellness and prosperity of the American Indian community.

“We want to create a big ripple, a big voice that shows the quality and diversity of work in the Midwest. We want the ‘wow’ factor.”

– Dyani White Hawk Polk

Artist Dyani White Hawk Polk is AMRA's curator. “The gallery has a different meaning today,” Dyani said. “It's a platform we use strategically for all kinds of things.” She cited a recent forum with newly-elected Minneapolis Mayor Betsy Hodges, the launch of “Breakfast Bites” as a community conversation series, and partnership with the Minnesota Humanities Center on a program titled, “Why Treaties Matter.”

Jay Bad Heart Bull, NACDI's president and CEO, says that AMRA supports NACDI's larger development strategy to create an American Indian Cultural Corridor centered on Franklin Avenue. NACDI's vision imagines a vibrant American Indian neighborhood that includes businesses, civic, and cultural organizations. “AMRA can be a beacon and a magnet,” Jay said, bringing both residents and visitors to the district and advancing NACDI's asset-based approach.

“ArtsLab really allowed this transition to happen,” Andy Hestness, NACDI vice president reflected. “It gave the new partnership enough momentum to find our new home, and helped us with training to make it happen.” Today All My Relations Arts is a bustling hub and a gallery pursuing high artistic standards. It's a place the community calls home.



Hear reflections from All My Relations Arts on *Claiming Your Story*

<http://bit.ly/artslab-amra>

The Arts Partnership

Fargo, North Dakota

Draw a wider circle. You'll find more friends.

The Arts Partnership, known as TAP, is a dynamic multi-sector coalition of 130 partner-members in the greater Fargo, West Fargo, and Moorhead region who are collaborating “to cultivate the arts in the region.” Not long ago, TAP was the Lake Agassiz Arts Council, with a more inward-facing mission to advance the work of 59

partner-members, composed entirely of arts organizations.

TAP leaders say its transformation can be traced directly back to the organization's

participation in ArtsLab, when Board and staff crafted a fresh vision for the organization. At the time of their ArtsLab application, Martha Olsen, then part-time executive director, predicted that ArtsLab would help TAP do what it did “only better.” But ArtsLab broadened their vista, and Martha realized that TAP needed an overhaul in thinking about the arts in Fargo-Moorhead.

“We realized that we needed a framework for dialogue about the future of our organization, and the comprehensive nature of ArtsLab made all the difference to us.”

– Martha Olsen



Dale Cook, woodturner, gives a demonstration during Fargo Moorhead Visual Artists' annual Studio Crawl, supported by a grant from TAP.

Photo courtesy of The Arts Partnership

road map” and inspired Olsen to step aside to create opportunity for a new, full-time director. The Board identified actor and artist Dayna Del Val to lead the organization.

TAP realized they had the potential to do more marketing and advocacy on behalf of the arts in the Fargo region and less direct programming. This vision sparked a series of new strategies for TAP. With Carol's guidance, TAP created an Advocate Partner category of membership and invited area businesses to get involved. The added category brought many new people and new revenue to the work. TAP also ended publication of an expensive print newsletter and invested instead in staff to create multiple digital communications channels. Today TAP reaches its members and the public by e-newsletter, Facebook, Twitter, and its website, and Dayna writes a monthly column for the *Fargo Forum*, the region's largest daily newspaper. TAP also hosts informal networking events to complement their online presence.

TAP now describes its Board of Directors as “bold” and can easily verify that descriptor. With a broader coalition of business and arts constituents, TAP has been able to integrate the arts into Fargo's long-term development plan; increase city funding from Fargo, West Fargo, and Moorhead (for which TAP is the re-granting body); and develop a larger and more consistent funding base.

What's next for TAP? Reflecting on their transformation, Carol said that, “organizations tend to advance either because of crisis or because of vision.” She sees TAP as actively visionary around cultivating the value of the arts and sees a world of possibilities ahead.



TAP is a collective of artists, arts-related businesses, and arts organizations, such as Gasper's School of Dance.

Photo by Britta Trygstad

Mizna

St. Paul, Minnesota

Stay the course. The larger purpose is your North Star. Tap outside resources during transitions.

A group of artists began Mizna in 1998 to foster contemporary Arab American culture in the Twin Cities. “Mizna” means “a welcome cloud, a respite.” The group developed a literary journal of contemporary Arab American writing and has since published 27 volumes. The journal is sold in independent bookstores and online, and has a strong following among individual and library subscribers nationally and internationally.



Writers share in the creative process at Mizna's writing group.

Photo by Ackerman + Gruber

Mizna's programs have expanded beyond literature. Its eighth annual Twin Cities Arab Film Festival opened last year at the Walker Art Center with five days of screenings and related programs. Mizna also presents readings by Arab American authors, and offers classes in Arabic language and Arabic drumming.

But Mizna's 15-year path has not been without bumps in the road. When Mizna applied to ArtsLab in 2008, it was emerging as a dynamic organization with an active Board of Directors and distinctive programs.

However, when founder Kathryn Haddad resigned to pursue her own writing, a period of instability ensued. Today Mizna has rebounded and is stable and growing, led by former Board member and long-time volunteer Lana Barkawi as executive director.

Mizna credits three factors that kept the organization from folding during its rockiest years. First and foremost, they have a devoted and energetic Board of Directors who have maintained their commitment throughout, including several who've been involved since inception. Second, Mizna credits ArtsLab, which created and sustained momentum among Board members during its critical juncture. “It was not only the money,” said Rabi'h Nahas, then Board chair. “Most of what we were learning



Mizna produces journals featuring the work of writers, poets, and artists exploring Arab America.

Photo by K. Flo Razowsky

was immediately actionable.” As the third factor, Mizna credits an experienced bookkeeper who “kept them legal” during the transition. She made sure the organization filed necessary taxes and kept track of grant reporting.

Reflecting on ArtsLab, Rabi'h said that, “I wasn't really ready for it culturally, not just the amount of lingo, but conceptually, it was like a sociological experience for me.” Yet he and Board member Nahid Khan quickly detail the program's lasting outcomes, including their continuing relationships with other ArtsLab participants. Rabi'h cites in particular the support and coaching provided by Sharon Rodning Bash, ArtsLab's program director, and the hands-on financial assistance provided by ArtsLab faculty Kate Barr.

Mizna today is a sought-after partner for cultural projects, and has expanded its reach and influence through collaboration with organizations like Northern Spark, the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, and Pangea World Theater. “We're back, and even stronger,” said Nahid. “The key now is to stay focused while we build and grow,” says Lana. “The core of our work is constantly affirmed by artists and audiences.”

“We are about what's happening right now in contemporary Arab American arts—coming from Arab Americans. It's a vibrant scene, and it's so absent from Americans' consciousness.”

— Lana Barkawi



The Cedar Cultural Center

Minneapolis, Minnesota

Know your neighbors. Don't abandon your core audiences, and don't be afraid to bring on the new.

The Cedar Cultural Center marks its 25th anniversary this season. Within its busy schedule of 200 events, the Cedar will collaborate on programming with immigrant communities in its neighborhood, offer educational performances for youth during and after school, and partner with other cultural organizations to bring its global music menu to places around the region.

How did a low-tech former movie theater in a vibrant but gritty urban neighborhood grow into a cultural destination celebrated as a premiere U.S. music venue? “We did it by tapping into something that has meaning for people, that’s our through line, that’s what’s worked,” said Rob Simonds, long-time executive director. By listening to its community, and looking from the outside in, the Cedar evolved its definition of

“traditional” music.

It now embraces contemporary traditions from across all continents, races, and ethnic groups. The framework of tradition animates and expands the Cedar’s musical choices instead of narrowing them.

“It’s a true melting pot, the standard-bearer for a neighborhood that’s evolved into one of our richest cultural microcosms, a venue that pays homage as equally to folk ensembles from West Africa as it does to indie rockers from the West Coast.”

**– City Pages: Best of the Twin Cities
Best Concert Venue 2013**

Board member David Edminster was part of the team that participated in ArtsLab from 1997–2000. He still remembers the impact ArtsLab had on his perceptions as the Board’s then-chair. ArtsLab’s curriculum, especially presentations about organizational life cycles, helped David realize how other organizations participating in ArtsLab were thriving while the Cedar was only coping. The grant that was part of ArtsLab was also extremely important to the Cedar, “at a time when every dollar counted,” he recalled. ArtsLab gave David confidence to push for



Ku Soo Dawaadaa Xafadeena with the Cedar Riverside Art Zone for Youth, a collaboration of Bedlam Theatre, Mixed Blood Theatre, and The Cedar Cultural Center.

Photo by Trang Do, Ten Thousand Words Photography, Courtesy of Bedlam Theatre

things he might not have otherwise, things like a more formal budget and financial reporting, an organization chart, and job descriptions. “It was clear we needed to grow up. When I heard that some organizations had a cash reserve, I thought, ‘You must be dreaming!’” David said.

From this realization came the Board’s emerging vision for a stronger organization and then the Cedar’s first multi-year strategic plan. Developed during ArtsLab, the plan called for investments to build contributed support, for hiring their first development director, and for deeper investigation into potential new audiences for the Cedar’s work.

The Cedar is now in the quiet phase of a \$10 million capital campaign. The campaign goals include many that were part of the plan developed in 2000. It’s taken a decade to bring the Cedar to the point where major capital fundraising is realistic and achievable.

Touring the Cedar, and pointing to its cramped quarters, Rob said, “You might wonder whether it would be easier to move than to renovate this space. No. This neighborhood and the people who live here are an important part of us, part of our personality and identity. Ultimately this neighborhood has become an important part of our mission, we’ve become a part of this place.”



Theatre B

Fargo, North Dakota

Apply artistic practice. Bring the creative process to operations.

Theatre B's founding artists remember walking around downtown Fargo, looking at empty buildings, and imagining them as theater spaces. Eventually they decided to put on a show. Why? An overwhelming desire to bring *Dinner with Friends*, the Donald Margulies play that won the 2000 Pulitzer Prize, to the Fargo community. That experience led to the creation of Theatre B to "put on great shows with great actors and produce plays worth seeing," built around a resident ensemble.

Today Theatre B presents four mainstage shows each year in its historic storefront, with the tag line "rearranging the furniture of your mind." From inception, the theater has been artist-led and artist-driven. Company members sell print ads in programs they've typed and photocopied themselves; they serve as box office staff, bookkeepers, fundraisers, and Board members. This drive comes, in part, from witnessing other founding artists lose control of their enterprises. To prevent such a scenario at Theatre B, they've crafted by-laws requiring that artists hold a majority of seats on their Board of Directors.

Ensemble artists take a democratic approach to leading the organization artistically. But they're far from alone in doing the organization's work, thanks in part to ArtsLab's curriculum and fellow participants who shared other ways of working. Theatre B artists also credit ArtsLab with a profound shift in their focus from inside-out to outside-in as they came to understand how a deeper partnership with the community could result in growth and vitality. By welcoming participation on the Board beyond artists,



Theatre B's production of Alfred Hitchcock's *39 Steps*.
Photo courtesy of Theatre B

Theatre B founders also shifted from a reticence toward including others to excitement about new energy and perspectives available to them.

Ensemble member Brad Delzer says that Theatre B is a community of practice that "goes far beyond the practice of making theater to include the practice of creating the organization itself." Founding member Scott Horvik explains that ArtsLab "helped us see how traditional models work. We learned so much from that. But we also learned that we know how to do some things that traditional models don't provide, especially around artists' involvement." Among lessons learned? Maintain curiosity about learning to do things better, whether it's the art or the organization. Horvik says that Theatre B has stayed in close touch with other artist-led organizations that participated in ArtsLab. Part of their conversation is about, "How can we keep our work artistically fulfilling as the demands of our organizations expand?"

"We knew how to use an iterative process when it came to making the art stronger. We didn't know how to iterate when it came to running the organization."

– Carrie Wintersteen

Theatre B artists are discovering ways to draw from and apply their creative processes to build their enterprise. ArtsLab, and the camaraderie with like-minded peers in the program, was key to helping develop the awareness, skills, and connections needed to do just that.



Theatre B's historic building in downtown Fargo.

Theatre B photo by Marianne Combs / Minnesota Public Radio News. © 2010 Minnesota Public Radio. Used with permission. All rights reserved.

TU Dance

St. Paul, Minnesota

Develop the full enterprise. Create a solid plan and a clear and welcoming story.

When Toni Pierce-Sands and Uri Sands left the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre, it wasn't to retire. Instead, they relocated to the Twin Cities to engage in the growing dance community and to be closer to family in Toni's hometown of St. Paul. The two worked for other companies and created

one-off projects before deciding to launch TU Dance. Their vision is to create a center for dance performance and dance access.

"We want kids to know that dance shouldn't be a privilege. Anyone who wants to do it should be able to."

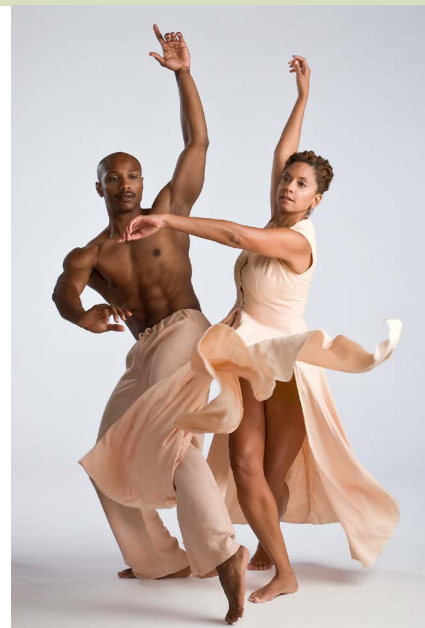
– Toni Pierce-Sands

Ten years in, TU Dance is thriving. Local performances sell out to enthusiastic audiences, and TU Dance Center, a school and rehearsal space that opened in 2011, serves more than 100 beginning to advanced students. The company is establishing its national reputation through tours and residencies. The John S. and James L. Knight Foundation recently awarded TU a \$500,000 advancement grant.



Students rehearse at TU Dance Center.
Photo by Ackerman + Gruber

Board members Leif Anderson and Marcia Murray were important resources for Uri and Toni. A core element of the Board's philosophy was that TU would be artist-led. "From the start Toni and Uri were concerned about creating a strong organization," said Leif, founding Board chair. "They wanted to create an organization that they'd find satisfying as artists." Because the conversation was always about building an organization, Leif urged Uri to learn everything he could about leadership and management. "Uri needs to know how it all works," Leif believes. "At that time, Toni and I understood the studio part," Uri reflected, "but we had no idea about the infrastructure needed."



Uri Sands and Toni Pierce-Sands, co-founders, TU Dance.
Photo by Ingrid Werthmann

TU Dance entered ArtsLab with a high artistic profile and a desire to move from project-to-project to year-round operations. "Let's get organized" became a motto as the founders and Board leaders at TU moved through the ArtsLab curriculum. What came out of their time together was deep strategic thinking about how to strengthen the organization, and a five-year financial plan, complete with benchmarks and action steps, that the team calls their centering document.

In recent years that has changed. Uri said, "I realized that the administrative component of an arts organization is similar to the work that happens in a dance studio. Organizational operations are choreographed, and similar to dancers, potential success depends upon our ability to be disciplined, flexible, and creative." He's now as comfortable with a spreadsheet as he is in the studio. A support staff is on board, including part-time Managing Director Abdo Sayegh Rodriguez, a former dancer. TU also credits grants consultant Don Sommers who helped them understand that start-up funding would reach a natural peak, and that they would need diverse revenue for long-term sustainability.

Looking back at the five-year planning process TU's leaders cite its importance to the enterprise. "It's been the heart of our discipline," explained Leif. "It's the core document that provided structure to our work."

 **Hear reflections from TU Dance on *Developing the Enterprise***

<http://bit.ly/artslab-tudance>

Edge Center for the Arts

Bigfork, Minnesota

Take a long view. Patience pays off.

Nestled in the woods of far northern Minnesota in the town of Bigfork, population 400, the Edge Center for the Arts motto, “wildly unexpected,” both resonates with the area’s wilderness location and describes the contemporary artwork one encounters in the center’s gallery or its 280-seat theater. Sustained by more than 300 volunteers



Pulling together events with a mostly volunteer staff, the Edge has become a hub of arts activities, residencies, and collaborations for the Bigfork area.

Photo courtesy of Edge Center for the Arts

drawn from the surrounding countryside and supported with only a part-time paid office manager, the Edge presents new theater, dance, visual arts, and music; hosts artists’ residencies; and partners with area American Indian artists to showcase their work.

The Edge was founded in 1992 and began itinerant programming. By 1998, a coalition of key regional foundations had come together to help the Edge raise funds for a permanent home. The \$2.2 million building opened in 2004 as an addition to the area’s K-12 school. While the District owns the building and pays for utilities, janitors, and security, cultural programs are created and financed by the nonprofit Edge Center.

When the Edge began ArtsLab in 2008, operations had become more complex, volunteers were stretched, and the Board felt it was time “to grow up.” Through ArtsLab,

the Edge created its first detailed plan, laying out three years of activities and budgets. With no paid staff at that time, Board members led the ArtsLab work. They remember the planning process visually: it was created using multi-colored Post-Its for each planning track (programs, operations, audience development, finances, and governance) and covered nearly an entire wall.

Edge volunteers took advantage of ArtsLab’s consulting and financial support. Purchases like new accounting software, signage, and an office space with internet access were coupled with consulting that helped establish explicitly-defined volunteer succession and rotation processes. The Edge also collaborated with other ArtsLab participants, inviting TU Dance, Theatre B, and All My Relations Arts to their space for residencies.

Succession processes created during ArtsLab have proven particularly durable and useful, with board and committee chairs continuing to transition smoothly. And the idea of a visible planning wall has stuck with the Board. “We learned that it’s not just about the programming. It’s also about audience development, governance, and operations. You have to plan for all of these,” said Lynn Nachbar, retiring Board chair.

The Edge offers key insights for sustaining an organization in a small community.

“In small towns, everyone does everything,” said

Patricia Feld, credited as the Edge Center’s founder. Leadership rotation is essential to maintaining momentum and keeping volunteer workloads reasonable. The Board re-sets priorities frequently to “get done what needs to get done while waiting for the right time for some projects,” explained incoming Board Chair Karen Ferlaak. Their resourcefulness is a lesson for organizations everywhere.

“We learned early on—sometimes you can’t reach goals because you don’t have the resources. We’ve had to focus and be patient.”

– Lynn Nachbar

Mu Performing Arts

St. Paul, Minnesota

Invest in a common language. Take time together as a staff and board.

What happens when the founder of one of a community's most respected cultural organizations announces his retirement? That's the recent story of Mu Performing Arts, a Twin Cities-based and nationally-prominent Asian American cultural organization. Through recent participation in a national capacity building program offered by Asian American/Pacific Islanders in Philanthropy (AAPIP), Mu Performing Arts honed its mission statement to explicitly state its social justice context as "born of arts, equality, and justice."

Canadian-born playwright and director Rick Shiomi founded Theater Mu in 1992. Accomplished in taiko as well as theater, Rick also began to teach drumming and eventually established Mu Daiko, a performance troupe and training program. Today the combined Mu Performing Arts produces original and contemporary theater, performs taiko concerts, offers actor and musician training, and brings its expertise to educational and community partners through workshops, classes, and performances.

"ArtsLab is giving us a way to talk about things during our leadership transition that might be taken as personal in a different context, but in the ArtsLab context, it's about the work we do."

— Don Eitel, Managing Director

When Rick initiated conversations about retirement, it was with a two-year lead time. A Board search committee and Don Eitel, managing director, conducted the search using Mu's network of national contacts. In 2013, they appointed Randy Reyes as Artistic Director; he was already playing a leadership role at Mu as an actor and director, and as community liaison and artistic associate for the previous six years. He and Rick also had participated in Theater Communications Group's national mentorship program, New Generations, which supports the development of new theater leaders.



Mu's 2013 production of Saymoukda Duangphouxay Vongsay's *Kung Fu Zombies vs. Cannibals*.

Photo © Michal Daniel

Mu's participation in ArtsLab is now straddling the two artistic leaders' tenure. While Don and Rick first sought out ArtsLab as "a fast and rigorous way to plug in the new leadership team," today Don and Randy are the staff participants. Board members Kari Ruth and Dorothy Mollien have sustained their involvement, providing continuity for Mu in ArtsLab.

Don describes ArtsLab as "giving us a structured process for learning and dialogue." At a time when the organization could have been vulnerable, it has become stronger, drawing from ArtsLab's curriculum, its peer learning approach, and the time organizational leaders have together. For Randy, ArtsLab offers an immediate way in, giving him room to assert his artistic vision and leadership quickly.

Mu's founder transition is going well. Randy is already making an organizational and artistic impact, focusing on bringing a new, young cohort of actors into the organization, investing in relationships across the staff and board, and paving the way to imaginative future projects. "We're building a seismic core of relationships and talent," Randy says.

And as managing director, Don is energized. "Succession is working at Mu because our mission stayed the same even as our artistic leader changed," he reflected. Mu Performing Arts seems positioned to continue its dynamic contributions to the local, regional, and national performing arts field.



About ArtsLabsm

ArtsLab is a leadership and strategy development program that strengthens the capacities of artists, arts leaders, and arts organizations across the Midwest.

Launched in 1999 as a pilot project of six major funders, ArtsLab has explored and developed new approaches to building leadership and management skills in community-based arts organizations. In 2012, ArtsLab became a core program of Arts Midwest and has remained committed to offering in-depth learning experiences that catalyze new ideas and craft tangible paths to strategic change.

ArtsLab is based in the belief that arts and culture are essential to vibrant communities, competitive industries, and strong economies. Yet it recognizes that artists, arts organizations, and communities struggle with rapid changes in communications, technology, demographics, and the economy. It believes that the best way to ensure their resiliency is to support the acquisition of new skills, tools, and management habits that enable them to navigate this constantly changing environment.

Over the past decade, a focal point of ArtsLab has been a two-year peer learning community. Approximately 16 organizations, selected

through a competitive application process work together as mirrors and mentors to cross-pollinate ideas and address strategic questions. Activities include weekend retreats throughout the year, monthly webinars, access to mentors, and financial support to implement a project identified in the program as central to development. This highly-participatory process, with its combination of guided group learning and individual coaching, helps participants assess critical needs, articulate their relevancy to their communities, foster relationships across sectors, adapt to change, and build leadership practices that are both risk-taking and strategic.

Independent evaluators have commended ArtsLab for its positive impact on participants, finding significant evidence that the program permanently shifts thinking around relevancy, engagement, and strategy. As ArtsLab moves into its next phase, Arts Midwest will continue to offer these critical opportunities for artists, cultural leaders, and their organizations to learn and grow—keeping the Midwest at the forefront of the nation's creativity and vitality.



ArtsLabSM

Strengthening the impact of arts organizations in urban and rural communities through leadership and strategy development

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